

Come On Down, Sweet Virginia

Fock 1: Getting' Thru DC



It would be hard for me to find anything to bitch, whine, or gripe about regarding the Old Dominion State. I'm sure I'll do it, but it won't be easy. The state is beautiful, and something to look forward to, regardless of which direction you're traveling. Coming from the north on I-95, you get to leave the congestion and aggravation of Baltimore and DC behind, and roll into relief. Or if you come in from WV on I-81, you progress from the hills of PA, and the high hills of WV, onto the backbone of the Appalachian

Chain.

From the south on I-77, across the plains of northern North Carolina, you see a formidable wall rise up before you, covered with lush trees. The sign at the VA border proclaims, "Welcome to Virginia. Keep It Green." Nice effect, except for autumn, when the hills are a veritable artist's palette of reds, oranges, yellows, golds, and browns. And winter, when it is a gray-and-white façade that is a harbinger of the adventurous, twisting, icy, climbing roadways within.

All my early I-95 roadtrips involved a Richmond pass-through, which was a piece o' cake unless it was rush hour. In those heavy traffic hours, Richmond backs up as bad as some cities twice its size. At least until the I-295 belt was built just to the east. I had the good fortune of being one of the first to drive that wonderful urban circumventer when it was completed in the 80's. It was excellent. Brand new smooth asphalt, freshly cut cliffs, an eye-catching span-contraption towering above the median at some point, and, best of all, no traffic. Maybe the road hadn't caught on yet, or maybe the designers simply overestimated the flow of through traffic, but here was a 50-mile stretch of say-bye-bye-to-the-Richmond-crush roadway. Instead of forty-five minutes of brake-and-roll, brake-and-roll, brake-and-roll, it was a cruise control stroll, and a gain of both time and significant distance. What a boon.

That 295 belt took the last aggravation out of driving through Virginia. Once that was opened, Arlington became the Gateway to Smooth Sailing. Clearing the horrible crunch where the Capital Beltway (I-495 and I-95) and the Henry "Don't Call Me" Shirley Memorial Highway (I-395) slam together in a mockery of the word "merge," now signaled carefree driving all the way to Florida.

Three hours of Virginia, three hours of North Carolina, and three hours of South Carolina made for well-paced Welcome Center stops on a flat, straight highway to sunshine and warmth.

But the urban crunch of the northeast lost its appeal after a couple of trips. Once the highlights of Baltimore and our nation's capital had been experienced, it was time to find a better alternative to the NY bridges, the NJ toll roads, and the Delaware ripoff.

Richie and I discovered I-81 and Skyline Drive in that initial *Rudes Rock The Rockies* roadtrip in 1983. We did the I-95 route to DC, though, before angling west. We were pretty much roadtrip rookies, so all the crap along the way was still new enough to be interesting.



Washington DC was virgin turf that year, and the Rude Brothers left an impression. The District of Columbia is so named because it was built on the land of the Territory of Columbia (named after Chris Columbus), a 10 square mile piece of land that used to be part of Virginia and Maryland.

DC swelters in July. Temperatures over 90° are commonplace – record highs are over 100° for 22 of July's 31 days – and dew points over 70 occur regularly. It is a sweaty place to be. And that makes it a very sweaty place to run.

The hazy air made little difference to us; the van had no air conditioning, so being sticky was just the way it was gonna be. We just kinda got accustomed to breathing only through our mouths when we were in close quarters. The sweat was something that was bound to happen that day anyway, even if we were just stuck in traffic. Never having had any vehicle with AC, we didn't lament its absence. We kept the big red Coleman cooler between the front seats of the van, and we kept a soft sponge in the cooler (along with ice, food, and beer). If we got jammed in traffic, and the heat and humidity got too uncomfortable, we'd just sploosh the wet icy cold sponge on our chests. Getting the nylon running shorts wet was no problem; it only helped to clean them, and the vinyl seats were grateful for the rinse as well.



Showers took some courage at times. When the ice had melted enough to warrant a cooler drain, we would take that as our cue to shower. I'd heft the cooler up onto the roof of the van, and open the little plug. The gush of water was like a hose from the Arctic Ocean, but we would take turns standing and frantically scrubbing under its flow. Man, oh man, is that a wake-up! Try scrubbing your scalp with ice water and see how invigorating it is!



So, you see, there were feeble attempts at hygiene. We weren't totally disgusting *all* the time. But that was part of the appeal of roadtrippin' too, though: the carefree who-cares-if-I-stink attitude. We didn't know any of these people, so our reputations as young professionals were not on the line. We weren't out to make a good impression; none of their opinions mattered to us.

But, for foolish conscientious reasons, Richie and I felt it was necessary to run every day on our roadtrip. It was so stupid. We pretended to believe that by going for a half-hour run every day on the road, that we would stay in shape and not gain any weight. Why we thought that a pitifully slow twenty minutes – our "close enough" figure – would somehow cancel out the twenty beers a day we were each drinking is beyond me. We knew we were full of shit, but it helped to mitigate the guilt, so we shrugged and rolled with it.

So here we were on a sauna of a day in DC, running along the reflecting pool and the Mall – a run which I highly recommend – after touring some of the side streets.

When you go to Washington DC, you do not want to stray far from the concentration of government buildings. The monuments, museums, and official buildings are magnificent, and they do create a powerful feeling of pride in our strong nation. But, it is magnificence among squalor. DC has much ghetto, and you do not have to wander far to find it.

Richie and I branched only slightly down the side streets – in search of a place to relieve our bladders – and returned hastily to the Mall area. I carried my camera on this run, because I knew damn well we were not going to spend all afternoon retracing these steps; this run was our official sightseeing venture. Our jaunt took us from the Ellipse by the White House, past the Jefferson Memorial, up into the Lincoln Memorial, right by the Smithsonian, and finally to the Capitol building. Naturally, we had to sprint up the extensive front steps of the Capitol Building.

It's a very impressive edifice, and the overzealous dash up the stairs only left our heroes even more breathless and more sweaty. We looked soggy, and smelled bad. It was the reek of yesterday's alcohol being wrung out of our dehydrated bodies, mingled with plain old runner's persp, a day-old no-shower staleness, and ripe veteran running shoes. Not a good blend at all. We were, indeed, rude. We could have made a small fortune by selling Lysol to the people around us.



There was a queue of fairly well-dressed people extending out one of the front doors of the Capitol, apparently waiting patiently for their tour. They eyed us with a mixture of disdain and amusement: disdusement.



We hung around the front veranda for a bit, diggin' the view of the mile-long Mall with the Washington Monument dead ahead, and the Lincoln Memorial in the distance. The sweat wasn't evaporating very fast in the humid, breezeless air, but at least the shadow of the building itself was giving us a little cooling break.

Like dogs placed into new territory, we began to sniff around – not literally, come on now – to see what-else was what-else here. We casually walked around the outside of the building, looking up at the architecture and down at the landscaping. Both were very nice. Then

we spied an open door in the north side of the building. If there was any kind of "No Admittance" sign, we didn't see it – not that we searched for one – so we just wandered on in. After all, we're taxpaying Americans, and this is our main building, so why not?



The door led into a hallway, very pleasant and cool, with paintings on the wall. The hallway was fairly short, and soon opened up into a huge central room, with a very high, domed ceiling: The Rotunda. Still attired in our soggy shorts and sopping, tattered, tanks and T's, we strolled leisurely into the room.

It was quite a sight. Our eyes scanned the high rounded walls, absorbing the elaborate artwork and accoutrements. The walls rose and rose, climbing past slim windows that lit the elegantly arching dome, which was fully decorated with painstakingly detailed artwork. It was most impressive. There was a reverential air to this place. Wiggled images looked down from wall carvings with the somber confidence of conquerors. Our rubber-soled sneakers made no sounds as we crossed the smooth floor to stand in the very center of this formidable chamber.



I snapped a couple of pictures, then I happened to lower my gaze and see the kinda-nicely-dressed people standing obediently along the side wall, behind the velvet ropes. There was a sport-coated young man near the front of their queue, facing away from us. Many of the people were looking our way with puzzled demeanors. We were the only

ones not contained behind the velvet ropes. I became aware of a faint murmuring among the queuers. It echoed softly in the bottom of the vast room, like a rippling stream deep in a cavern.

Then Richie let out a belch. And it was truly a quality belch. It was an I-chugged-a-large-Pepsi-for-breakfast belch. There was pride in the belch. And tone. And, most definitely, volume. In this echo chamber, the blast soared upward and reverberated around the walls with persistence. It seemed to hang in the air for quite a while, like the smoke that lingers in the light breeze after a skyrocket explodes.

Like all others, I turned to look at Richie, whose eyes were still raised dome-ward. Unlike the others, my turning was casual, as was my voice when I commented, "Good one."

"Yup," he replied with easy satisfaction.

"Well, let's mosey."

"Yup."

And we turned and strolled back to the hallway from whence we came. There was no hurry in our departure. We heard no pursuit or voices of protest, other than a marked increase in murmuring. Even the sport-coated young man – likely just a college Poli-Sci major on a cool and cushy summer job – had simply turned and stared in disbelief, but without any hint that he knew how to address this particular situation. It is doubtful that his training included Ejection Of Malodorous Belchers From The Rotunda.

But we were only a few feet outside when we heard the door close firmly and decisively behind us, and the latch click shut. We shrugged and moved on.

The District of Columbia, being home to more than 609,000 people, is by far the most densely populated territory in the United States, with nearly 10,000 -- yes, read that number again, **10,000!** -- people crammed into each of its 61 square miles. New Jersey -- with a piddling 1044 per mi² -- ranks a distant second.

So, why is it always a "Square Mile?" Why not a Triangular Mile, with each side a mile long? How about a Round Mile, reaching out exactly a ½-mile radius on each side of a central point? In fact, here's a math problem for you: if you have 10,000 people in one square mile, and you move them into one round mile, what is the population density per round mile? Chew on that for a minute, you Einsteins.

Anyway, if we do the same thing with the DC'ers that we did with all those damn New Yorkers, and spread them out equally throughout their district, each DC'er would only have an area 52 feet by 52 feet to him or herself. That's all. Barely enough room to fart freely.



And D.C. has a funky flag. Most people are probably not familiar with it. It's white with two fat red stripes and three red stars above the stripes. It looks vaguely Arabic. Or like the kind of flag you'd see in an Indiana Jones movie when he's off in some fictional country chasing some old cup or box or something.

When Washington DC releases its half-million-plus workers for the day, the escape highways clog like Chris Farley's arteries. It takes hours for the slogging traffic to painfully unsnarl.



The aforementioned 495/395 merge is one of the worst bottlenecks in the U.S., rivaling anything that LA or NYC can throw together. Maybe it seems worse since you are so tantalizingly close to free-flowing open road and pleasing aesthetics of Virginia. Any further delay just foodles your floatum.

But all those smaller DC roadways excreting their traffic into the larger highways sets up one of the most aggravating scenarios:

You're wheeling your automobile down the curving pavement of the highway entrance ramp, accelerating towards the end. You know that the end of the ramp is not, in fact, an end, but a nightmarish merge into a mile-a-minute flow of maniacs. You're aware that most of these men and women have spent the previous eight hours accumulating frustrations, aggravations, and downright infuriations at their jobs, and that they've had no opportunity to release those pent-up agonies. They have choked them down behind false smiles and bland expressions, muttering "yes, sir" and "yes, ma'am" through discreetly clenched teeth. To the majority of the work force, The Customer (and the Boss) Is Always Right, no matter how stupid, anal, bull-headed or ignorant they actually are. It adds up. You know the feeling well - everyone does. There's nothing they can do about it. They've been bottling up those emotions hour upon hour with *no way to let them out*.

Until now.

They have doffed their business personas, donned their 2000-pound motorized suits of armor, and with load of annoyances fully in tow, launched themselves into the arena of gladiatorial combat that we commonly refer to as The U.S. Interstate Highway System.

And now you're a hundred yards away from plunging into their midst.

But you are ready for them. Oh, yes. You've keyed yourself up to do battle. Your senses are awake and alert. This is no place for the faint of heart. No time for indecision. Lost be he who hesitateth. Your heartbeat is a little faster. Your grip on the steering wheel is a little tighter. You're sitting up straighter in your seat, even leaning forward some.

The ramp is almost done. You gaze hard left to calculate the velocity vectors and angles of attack within the onrushing swarm. You pick your spot: right behind the red Camaro and just ahead of the white Suburu -- "the timidity gap". It's a rare find, so you lock your sights on it and begin the gas pedal squeeze. If you can position your front fender far enough ahead of the Suburu's bumper, you can lay rightful claim to that spot and smoothly merge without changing anybody's flow. If you're late getting there, the Suburu boxes you out and you face the constant wall of cold faces and no eye contact: in this arena, eye contact is a sign of concession, and you will be given no quarter.

OK. It's lined up. The speed is good. The timing will be perfect. You feel the move. Nothing can go wrong now. Even though the highway itself offers a full spectrum of its own worries, threats and anxieties, the imminent disaster, at least, has been averted.

With fresh confidence, you begin to settle back. You ease a bit more pressure onto the accelerator, and face fully forward again. **AND TWO BRIGHT RED LIGHTS ARE RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU!!** The yellow Escort in front of you is *stopping!* Not just *yielding*, as the red-and-white sign demands, but full-fledged, hit the brakes, arrest all forward motion, *stopping! The cowardly dolt!*

The next instant is a whirl of adrenal panic. You pounce on the brake pedal with both feet. The subsequent screeching might be from your tires; it might be from your throat. Your shoulders jam back into the seat; it might break under the strain. Your arms lock straight out. Your fists clench on the steering wheel; there just might be a permanent impression. The color flees from your face. Your eyes clamp shut. ***Impact imminent! Impact imminent! Danger! Danger, Will Robinson!!***
AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!

You jerk to a halt. No impact. The yellow Escort is sitting there, its left turn signal blinking unconvincingly. Your opportunity is gone, and the unrelenting flood of cars drives by, laughing at your dilemma. The split second of relief gives way to anger. You HATE that Escort! That hatred blares out from your horn: **YOOOOUUUSSUUUCCCKKK!!**

But the Escort is oblivious. It waits blinkingly for all traffic to be gone. Hopeless fool!

You can't get around it. You are stuck. Exasperated, you throw your hands up and utter a string of expletives. The scurrilous catharsis does you little good. Your mind strays to vile things that you would like to perform on that weak-willed idiot: you'd impale him on an astrolabe, if you could find one.

Suddenly, your diabolical reveries are shattered by the screaming of rubber behind you. You brace again, and hold your breath. But no collision ensues.

Then you hear the blare of a horn: "YOOOOUUUSSUUUCCCKKK!!" Now you're doubly enraged. You respond to his blast, suggesting a clever place to redeploy his horn, and punctuating your suggestion

with a splendid gesture. He blares again and bellows impolite assertions about your maternal origins.

Just as you're about to jam your shifter into park and go bludgeon him with The Club, the Escort finds an opening and crawls forward into traffic.

Your mind flashes back to business: *Use the Siamese Twins Ploy!* the strategic center of your brain exclaims. Yes! But reaction time is critical. The ST Ploy depends on Zero Lag: you need to get so close to the Escort's rear bumper that there's not a breath of air between you, giving the clear impression that the two cars are, in actuality, just one long one, and must be treated as such by the flow of traffic. It will only work if the oncoming driver is a little bit zoned out by traffic, or the radio, or if he's on the phone. If not, you risk raising the stressed-out motorist's ire to dangerous levels. You could get rammed, or run right into the guard rail.

See, you're relying on the feigned bond with the Escort. The implication is: we *mustn't* be separated, we *can't* be separated, it is *imperative* that I cling to my guide! But if there's any lag at all, the slightest delay -- even a yard -- the ploy will fail. An ancillary benefit is that it will get that dunderhead off your tail; anyone who would fall for Siamese *Triplets* does not deserve a license to drive on our highways.

Of course, once you're in, you're still stuck behind that damn Escort. His brief usefulness as "guide" is gone instantly. Now he is In The Way again. You're still seething over that spot he caused you to miss, so as soon as you can cut off somebody to your left, you're gonna make him eat dust.

But it's not that easy. The Escort is slow (naturally) up this incline. Eighteen-wheelers are zipping by. There's a veritable *parking lot* opening up in front of this clueless menace. ARRGGHHH!! You've **GOT** to lose this moron!

Your left turn signal is still flashing away to beat the band, but no one cares. You are trapped, mate; nobody's going to give up their own uphill momentum just to get stuck behind someone who'll be Larry Lag.

All it takes is one slow bastard, and all traffic is affected. The ripples clog the highways for miles. One car pulls out without enough speed, and two or three others have to react with their brakes. The overly tense travelers behind them jump on their brakes, then a dozen for *them*, and three dozen more for *them*. In seconds, the whole damn highway is slogging along because of one slow dweeb.

It's enough to make you wail.

Of course, that assumes that traffic is still moving, and that is a HUGE assumption when it comes to the 395/495 Gordian Knot of traffic. It has widespread notoriety as a bad merge, so I always used to try to plan my southern swings so that I could get through Baltimore, DC, and Richmond at non-traffic times. Well, this one time, I just plain blew it, and was hitting this merge at 6:10 pm.

Traffic had been crawling anyway, and at the spot where the ramps met, there was the further constipatory factor of construction. You could actually feel the hatred and anger rising up all around. People bearing stress and frustrations from a long workday suddenly made longer, were blending very negative vibes -- the antithesis of negative ions, mind you -- in a contagious whirlpool of evil intent. Tempers were short, and delays were long. The river of brake lights stretched to the horizon.

I gave up.

I wheeled between two orange barrels into the breakdown lane, backed up under a bridge, closed the curtains, made an offering, and climbed in back for a special go-away-you-nasty-stress nap. It was about 10:00 when I woke up, totally refreshed, to see an almost empty highway. Yeah, I lost about four hours of time, but I'll bet I would have been real lucky to cover even three hours worth of distance in that time. This way, I sailed unimpeded into the Virginia and Carolina night and went strong till well past 2 a.m. That was the last time I took I-95 on a southerly trek.

But once you wiggle out of Washington, and get a few miles into Virginia, your roadtrip becomes a whole lot easier on the mind. No more clenching the steering wheel, or hovering your foot over the brake, or darting your eyes constantly from mirror to mirror to windshield. Virginia does embrace you. Strangely enough, their Welcome Center is not at the border, or even at the first Rest Area. For some reason it takes until the second rest stop for Virginia to deign to welcome you. Perhaps they know that you need a few minutes of open road to really feel free again.